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Human trafficking: An ancient trade with a modern face

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If we believe that advances in science, health and human rights have led to a more civilised society than before, think again.

The slavery trade, which past generations have fought to abolish, is now an underground enterprise with a different moniker: human trafficking. Through complex criminal networks, millions have been sold into servitude as labourers and prostitutes, making it the fastest growing criminal activity in the world.

The scale of the business is second only to drug trafficking. The International Labour Organisation, the tripartite United Nations agency which oversees international labour standards, estimates that [at least 12.3 million people](http://www.ilo.org/global/topics/forced-labour/lang--en/index.htm) (<http://www.ilo.org/global/topics/forced-labour/lang--en/index.htm>) around the world are trapped in forced labour.

Most of the victims are bought or kidnapped from poor countries and sold to the well-offs in developing and developed economies.

Linked to trafficking is the commercial sexual exploitation of children of whom one million, mainly girls, are forced into prostitution every year. These girls are sold for sex or used in child pornography in both the developed and the developing world.

And the potential for 'growth' is said to be promising for the traffickers, given that unlike drugs and arms, a human slave can be sold over and over again for profit.

What is different in modern slavery is the people who are doing the trafficking and the nature of the trade, said [Siddharth Kara](http://www.hks.harvard.edu/about/faculty-staff-directory/siddharth-kara/%28page%29/faculty) (<http://www.hks.harvard.edu/about/faculty-staff-directory/siddharth-kara/%28page%29/faculty>), one of the world's foremost experts on the topic.

Kara was speaking at a seminar organised by SMU's student political association [Apolitical](http://www.smuapolitical.com/) (<http://www.smuapolitical.com/>), a day before appearing as a speaker at the launch of Singapore's first [National Plan of Action against Trafficking in Persons](http://www.mom.gov.sg/newsroom/Pages/SpeechesDetail.aspx?listid=375) (<http://www.mom.gov.sg/newsroom/Pages/SpeechesDetail.aspx?listid=375>).

He is also the author of *'Sex Trafficking: Inside the Business of Modern Slavery'* (http://www.amazon.com/Sex-Trafficking-Inside-Business-Slavery/dp/0231139616/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1334563124&sr=8-1) which, in 2010, had picked up the prestigious *Frederick Douglass Award* at Yale University. The award is widely recognised as the top prize in the field of slavery scholarship.

Evolution of the human trade

While slaves in the past are mostly those who are spoils of war or exploited by colonial masters to work in the agriculture industry, the human trade today is run largely by organised crime syndicates, motivated by the profits, Kara said.

Compared to the old days of spending weeks at sea to travel from one place to another, it is much cheaper to transport a person in today's world. At the same time, there are more industries that a trafficked slave can work in.

Today, these slaves are made to work in industries such as commercial sex, mining and construction, said Kara who conducts his research by travelling around the world to interview trafficking survivors, law enforcement officers and social service workers.

It is simple economics: the reduced costs of the business mean handsome rewards for the traffickers and that is what is fueling the trade. Kara estimates that it costs an average of US\$2,000 to buy a slave in the past while it cost only US\$450 today. The return of investment on each slave is a staggering 300-400 per cent.

"The enormity of the phenomenon, in the contemporary context, is driven by the ability to generate very substantial economic returns at almost no real risk," he said.

There is "very little peril associated with the exploitation of trafficked victims" although trafficking is an illicit activity which should be risky to be involved in, Kara elaborated.

Noting differences in the definition of human trafficking across different countries, a lack of proactive investigations

and laws has prevented decisive legal action against human traffickers, Kara said: "The penalties tend to be disproportionately anaemic relative to the benefits to the crime."

Heavier penalties are thus necessary to deter traffickers; to make the climate appear sufficiently risky for potential offenders, he argued.

"One way which you tackle crime is not to stamp it out altogether but to make the climate appear to be sufficiently toxic or risky to the potential offender that they will think of doing something else," Kara said.

Furthermore, former trafficked victims require better protection and assistance from society for them to restart life.

Most of the time, they are treated as immigration offenders and deported back to their home countries before any prosecution against their exploiters can be completed. Once they are back at home, most fall right back into the poverty cycle – which is what had made them easy targets in the first place.

Kara stressed: "I can't tell you how many victims I've met and documented, the number of them who have been trafficked and re-trafficked and re-exploited because we simply had not protected or empowered them. It's really an appalling failure of the global community."

One participant at the seminar asked Kara how governments should balance their immigration policies between protecting the victims and not becoming a backdoor for illegal immigrants.

Kara replied the fear of an influx of illegal immigrants is a theoretical worry because it is "exceeding difficult" for trafficked victims to prove their grievances due to difficulties in producing concrete evidence.

"So I don't see it's a huge risk that once you show there is empowerment, care and protection associated with identified victims of human trafficking that this is going to open the floodgates for people to run in."

Having more legal support and protection for the victims is "worth testing", he said, "Because the alternative is that everyone is just going to get sent back and re-exploited. And the traffickers are staying in business. And that's not going to work."

Everyone is responsible

Human trafficking is not only an issue for governments to tackle. Kara reminded the audience that all individuals in society, as consumers who want to pay as little as possible for goods and services, have a role to play.


"This can often be a powerful force of demand that on the far side of the supply chain of a product means that someone's labour is being exploited. Because the price of anything we buy is largely a function of how much it cost to produce, market and distribution. And labour is a huge component." To cut costs, some businesses have been known to exploit labour or engage in unfair practices.


Kara, a proponent of ethical consumption, is, however, optimistic that more consumers are giving more attention to corporate ethics. As a result, more businesses are also realising that they need to examine their supply chains more closely. Some businesses take a more proactive step by providing employment to the poor or to former victims, thus protecting them from syndicates who often lure victims with promises of jobs and cash.

Individuals interested in human trafficking issues can help raise awareness amongst friends and support relevant non-government organisations (NGOs), Kara suggested.

He shared an example of how four 20-year-old university students had formed an NGO that employs 30 women in Cambodia - formerly trafficked victims – to sew bags which are then sold by retailers in New York.

"It may not change the whole country but those 30 people are safe," said Kara. "They have economic empowerment."

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